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AUTHOR Devitt, Sean M.
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ABSTRACT

An approach to the selection of second language reading material that is authentic but comprehensible at the lower levels begins by using materials with interesting content that are accessible to the student. The approach capitalizes on the students' prior knowledge, information resources, or supplementary information provided with the reading. It allows the students to react to the text in their own individual ways according to their own experiences and the knowledge they bring to the text. Such a technique is consonant with the communicative approach. It addresses the learner's own cognitive level and avoids providing them with bland, prepackaged language that does not promote real language skill development. The technique is illustrated with an article from a Danish newspaper. (MSE)

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FRAMEWORKS FOR READING

Sean M. Devitt

Trinity College, Dublin

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Sean M. Devitt
Trinity College, Dublin

FRAMEWORKS FOR READING

Using authentic texts in a language class is like giving adult food to children. In our world of convenience foods there is a tendency to give very young children specially prepared foods, such as, for example, Heinz or Farley's. However, health-conscious parents are often suspicious of such products. They prefer to give their babies the food they have prepared themselves, since they know the ingredients and since they are especially careful about its preparation.

In the language class we as teachers have been inclined to give specially prepared "convenience" texts to our beginner and intermediate learners and to leave the "adult diet", - authentic texts - until the learner is felt to be sufficiently sophisticated linguistically to be able to digest it. This usually means four years at least after he or she has begun learning the language. Even then we are sometimes slow to confront the weaker learner with the full "adult diet". We may be making a serious mistake.

This paper will attempt to set out very briefly some of the reasons for using authentic texts for reading from the very earliest stages of language learning, and will offer a few suggestions about how we may make them "digestable and tasty" for the sensitive linguistic palates and stomachs of our learners.

What learners bring to the reading task

Beginner language learners come to the task of reading in a foreign language not with a "tabula rasa", but with some very useful and usable knowledge. They have, after all, been around for at least twelve years and have learned a lot about the world. We can classify this knowledge under three main headings:

(i) *Knowledge of the world*: Under this heading we may include general knowledge as well as knowledge about certain specific topics. One thinks, for example, of football and pop-music as topics about which twelve year olds are likely to have much more knowledge than ourselves. In the literature on reading such knowledge of the world is frequently referred to as "content schemata". (see, for example, Carrell 1983, Anderson and Pearson, 1984)

(ii) *Knowledge of how discourse operates*: they already know how to read and will have had experience of different types of text in their native language - newspaper articles, stories, text-books, comics, etc[1]. While these discourse-types may differ from culture to culture, in our Western world at least most of

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them would be familiar to the average teen-ager. In the literature on reading this type of knowledge is referred to as "formal schemata" (see, for example, Carrell 1983, Meyer 1975, Meyer and Rice 1984). It might also be referred to as knowledge of "the vertical structure" of language, a term taken from Scollon (1976).

(iii) *Some linguistic knowledge*: our learners will know, for example, that there are such things as "content" words and "action" words; that words are joined together to create meaning; that changes occur to the forms of words in certain circumstances, etc.etc. Absolute beginners may have no knowledge of this particular language. They will lack the "horizontal structure" (again, a term taken from Scollon 1976); they lack most, if not all, of the elements needed to construct this horizontal structure. However, in contrast to the child learning its first language, beginner learners will know at least that such horizontal structures exist.

Most recent research on reading in a first language stresses the importance of the information which the reader himself brings to the reading task. Carrell (1983), for example, says:

> "A fundamental assumption of the schema-theoretic view of language comprehension is that the process of comprehending a text is an interactive one between the listener or reader's background knowledge of content and structure, and the text itself. The text alone does not carry meaning. Rather, a text only provides guidance for listeners or readers as to how they should construct the intended meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge. Since comprehension involves not only the information in the text, but also knowledge the listener or reader already possesses, efficient comprehension requires the ability to relate the textual material to one's own knowledge (Adams & Collins 1979). Comprehending words, sentences, and discourse, then involves much more than just relying on one's own linguistic competence. In fact, one's linguistic competence is just one part of one's total background knowledge." (p.83-83)

Frank Smith (1973) puts it more picturesquely when he says that reading is not a question of deciphering from the printed page, but rather that most of the information comes from "behind the eyeballs".

A certain amount of research has been done on reading in a second language. (See, for example, Hudson 1982, Johnson 1982, Anderson and Urquhart 1984). It is not my purpose in this paper to deal with such research, but rather to allow you, as reader or listener, to experience for yourself the importance of your own prior knowledge when reading a text in a language which is unknown to you, and to analyse in some little detail the process

by which you cope with such a text. The text in this instance is from a Danish paper, *Berlingske Sondag* of December, 1983 in which a very small number of changes have been made.

2500 MAND JAGER

TERRORISTERNE

Over 2500 soldater og politifolk fortsatte igår en gigantisk klapjagt på fire terrorister, der slap bort, da sikkerhedsstyrkerne fredag aften befriede direktør Hans Johannson og pågreb to af hans bortførere.

Under befrielsesaktionen blev en politikadet og en soldat dræbt af terroristerne, mens en kriminalbetjent blev saret. Igår blev en tilsyneladende ungesløs mand skudt i hovedet af politiet, da han forsøgte at køre udenom en vejspærring.

...Kidnapperne, der krævede to millioner pund eller næsten 30 millioner kroner i løsepenge, menes at være de samme som i sin tid bortførte vanddelsbehesten Elan, der aldrig er blevet fundet.

Befrielsesaktionen blev iværksat, efter at politiet havde modtaget et tip fra en kontakt indenfor BMH. Omkring 1000 politifolk og soldater med panserkøretøjer omringede en skovstrækning ved Kiel i Schleswig-Holstein grevskabet nær grænsen til Danmark. Der blev oprettet 50 vejspærringer og hvert enkelt hus blev minutiøst undersøgt.

Terroristerne forsøgte at flygte og skjule sig med deres offer i en hule som de havde forberedt i skoven, men de blev opdaget og åbnede ild imod politiet. De kastede en håndgranat der dræbte en soldat og en politikadet.

The only changes made in the above text were the following: (i) proper names were changed; (ii) one sentence was omitted. A little reflection on how you coped with this version of the text may allow you to observe some of the processes that operate when learners come in contact with texts in a foreign language. In the first instance you may have picked out a few familiar-looking words, such as *terroristerne, politifolk, kidnapperne*. Your knowledge of the world may have suggested a general framework for what might have happened, but beyond that you are likely to have made little sense of the article.

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Now try reading the text in its original form below.

2500 MAND JAGER

IRA-GRUPPE

Over 2500 irske soldater og politifolk fortsatte igår en gigantisk kæmpejagt på fire IRA-terrorister, der slap bort, da sikkerhedsstyrkerne fredag aften befriede supermarkeds-direktør Don Tidey og pågreb to af hans bortførere.

Under befrielsesaktionen blev en politikadet og en soldat dræbt af terroristerne, mens en kriminalbetjent blev såret. Igår blev en tilsyneladende ægeskifte mand skudt i hovedet af politiet, da han forsøgte at køre udenom en vejspærring.

Den britiske premierminister Margaret Thatcher lykønskede kordag sin irske kollega, Garret Fitzgerald med befrielsen af Tidey, der for 24 dage siden blev bortført af IRA-terrorister, forklædt som politifolk. Kidnapperne, der krævede to millioner pund eller næsten 30 millioner kroner i løsepenge, menes at være de samme som i sin tid bortførte væddeløbsbaronen Shergar, der aldrig er blevet fundet.

Befrielsesaktionen blev iværksat, efter at politiet havde modtaget et tip fra en kontakt indenfor IRA. Omkring 1,000 politifolk og soldater med panserkøretøjer omringede en skovstrækning ved Ballinamore i Leitrim - grevskabet nær grænsen til Ulster. Der blev oprettet 50 vejspærringer og hvert enkelt hus blev minutiøst undersøgt.

Terroristerne forsøgte at flygte og skjule sig med deres offer i en hule som de havde forberedt i skoven, men de blev opdaget og åbnede ild imod politiet. De kastede en håndgranat der dræbte en soldat og en politikadet.

In the case of the text that was reproduced in its original form as it appeared in the newspaper, even a casual glance through it is likely to have given you the general sense.[2] In this version you had precise people and events with which you were familiar. You will have been able to relate it to your memory of the events in question. This much more detailed framework gave you the means of deciphering many more of the words in the text.

It is important to remember, however, that it was the Danish text itself which evoked this framework. Thus, the framework of knowledge and the text itself were used cyclically to mutually illuminate one another. For example, you may have reinterpreted politifolk from "politicians" to "policemen" as a result of your prior knowledge. This new knowledge of elements of the language would then have enabled you to recall elements of the incident which you might have forgotten, or to check the accuracy of the information as given in the article. In technical terms what you were doing was combining "top-down processing" (using prior knowledge of the event) with "bottom-up processing" (decoding the elements of the text).

In so doing, you will also have come to some initial understanding of how the Danish language operates; for example, the fact that the definite article is tagged on to the end of the noun, (terroristerne), the formation of the passive voice (blev dræbt, "were killed") etc. Thus, not only were you able to make a certain amount of sense from the article when it was presented in its original form, but you also learned quite an amount of Danish, not just vocabulary, but also morphology and syntax. In fact, the process is quite like that found for the acquisition of a first language by children.[3]

Some researchers (Carrell 1983(a) and Clarke 1979) have suggested that L1 reading strategies are not transferred to L2 reading. It seems patently obvious that this need not necessarily be the case if proper frameworks are already in place for the L2 reading. Where they are not already in place they can be created by the reader through appropriate "process materials"[4]. What this means in practice is that help is provided for the reader to enable him to create for himself the framework of prior knowledge that is necessary for the understanding of the text. This help will be provided at various stages, before and/or during the reading process. (See, for example, Hudson 1982 and Devitt (forthcoming) for a practical working out of such process materials for texts in an unknown language).

Unless such process materials are provided, the learner with very limited linguistic ability approaching a text in a foreign language is likely to be smitten by "tunnel vision": he/she will be concentrating on individual words and will lose the thread of the content. His or her reading will involve only bottom-up processing; it will be "data-driven" (Carrell 1983 b). Samuels and Kamil (1984) describe this type of reading in slightly different terms.

> "This alternative switching of attention from decoding to comprehension is similar to the strategy used by beginning students of a foreign language who first work their way through a novel written in a foreign language by translating all the difficult words and then rereading the text again in order to understand it. In beginning reading, the strategy of

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attention switching allows the student to comprehend, but it comes at a cost. Attention switching is time consuming, puts a heavy demand on short-term memory, and tends to interfere with recall."(p.197-8)

This sounds all too familiar, and the effects that this type of reading produces in terms of loss of motivation and frustration can be disastrous. However, we have just seen that this need not be the case. The sources of difficulty in texts in a foreign language may be much more easily surmountable than we have hitherto realised. The full "adult" text in Danish was digestible for you because you had prior knowledge of the topic and you knew how such texts were structured. You had the first two types of knowledge mentioned above (content and formal schemata). This gave you access to the third type of knowledge, - the knowledge of the language. Using texts about topics with which learners are familiar, or texts for which adequate process materials have been prepared, may in fact be a far more effective way of learning a language than what we have been doing hitherto. It has the following further advantages: (i) it allows for language development through the choice of texts and the choice of accompanying activities; it can therefore be used at all levels of language learning; (ii) it allows reading to be an integral part of language learning from the very beginning; (iii) it provides greatly increased language input, an input that can be accessed by the individual in his or her own time. Finally, it is worth pointing out that, while the examples used above have involved media texts, the approach can be used with any type of text including literary texts.

The principles on which such an approach to reading should be based are as follows:

(i) material should be selected that is at least potentially interesting FOR THE LEARNER. (It must be tasty!) It is not only the subject matter which must be interesting, however, but the treatment of it as well.

(ii) If the learner is not familiar with the topic, (does not have an adequate framework of knowledge) he or she can be helped to construct his/her own framework using his/her own resources or resources specially provided. Such help should be in the form of interesting activities, NOT comprehension questions. The emphasis should be on self-help rather than on testing. The activities should enable the learner to comprehend the text. (This would correspond in our analogy to the preparation of the food for the young child, - chopping it up into digestible bits and arranging it attractively.)

(iii) The learner should be given opportunity to react to the text in a normal way; this may mean simply reading it and storing the information in episodic memory, if it is simply a text recounting an event; alternatively, the text may present new and interesting or controversial elements and so generate reactions

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from the reader. One can imagine, for example, readers in the Irish context having different reactions to a French account of the present situation in Northern Ireland depending on their background.

(iv) Language improvement will occur naturally through such an approach. Exercises designed specifically for language improvement are really incidental to this basic process of comprehending a text and reacting to it. They can, however, be easily integrated into the process, provided they are seen to be secondary to it.

Such an approach to reading in a foreign language is consonant with the principles of the communicative approach, but it also conforms to fundamental pedagogical principles: "start from where the learner is at", "go from the known to the unknown", "centre your teaching on the learner". It also provides a powerful motivating force, since it provides material at the learner's own cognitive level and offers the possibility of immediate success with real language in use. Perhaps, therefore, it is time that we stopped giving our learners the specially doctored or sanitised language which is so often tasteless and that we changed to a healthier diet which would allow language skills to develop naturally.

[redacted]

[1] Unfortunately, this can not always be presumed even in our literate society. It is important to find out about the reading skills and habits in L1 of our group of learners.

[2] Given that it is some time since these events occurred, it may be worth summarising them here: Mr. Don Tidey, a director of the Quinnsworth chain of supermarkets, was kidnapped in late 1983 by the IRA and a ransom note sent to other directors. After some time the Gardai got a tip-off and surrounded the town of Ballinamore in Co. Leitrim, near the border of Northern Ireland. In the ensuing skirmish, Don Tidey was freed, but the kidnappers got away. A soldier and a Garda cadet were killed.

[3] See Devitt (forthcoming) for a development of this notion.

[4] The term comes from Breen, Candlin and Waters 1981.

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